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RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU PRIORITY 3952
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 2894
RUEHNY/AMEMBASSY OSLO PRIORITY 2984
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 2056
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI PRIORITY 4401
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI PRIORITY 6460
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS PRIORITY
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 1087
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000428

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STATE FOR SCA/INS
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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/29/2016
TAGS: PHUM PTER PGOV SOCI CE
SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: LTTE-BACKED STUDENTS BLOCK VICE
CHANCELLOR'S APPOINTMENT IN JAFFNA

Classified By: James F. Entwistle, Charge' d'Affaires, a.i. Reason: 1
.4 (B,D).

11. (SBU) Vehement protests by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)-affiliated Jaffna University Student Union (JUSU) have prevented Professor S. Ratnajeevan Hoole, who was appointed Vice Chancellor to the troubled university on March 9, from assuming his duties. President Mahinda Rajapaksa selected Hoole, who taught engineering for 13 years at Harvey Mudd College in Claremont, California, before returning to his native Sri Lanka in 1995, from a slate of three senior Tamil academics nominated by the 25-person University Council for the post. The head of the JUSU was reported to have threatened Hoole with assault if he showed up on campus, prompting a counter-press release from the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)-dominated Inter University Students Federation blaming the LTTE for orchestrating the opposition. Hoole remains in Colombo, pending resolution of the controversy.

12. (C) In a March 17 meeting with poloffs, Hoole, who said his wife had received death threats by telephone at their residence after his appointment, declared that he was nonetheless eager to take up his duties--provided he received "a green light" from the LTTE. He had returned from a comfortable life in the U.S. to help reverse the "brain drain" that has beset the Tamil community since the beginning of the conflict, he said; now was his chance to serve his country and his people. He charged that "low-level LTTE interests," as well as two Tamil National Alliance (TNA) MPs, Pathmini Sithamparanathan, whose husband teaches in the university drama department, and S. Gajendran, a former JUSU leader, were mobilizing student opposition against him. Hoole claimed that other TNA MPs, however, were not opposed to his appointment and that he had enlisted one Jaffna MP, M.K. Eelaventhen, as a go-between to plead his case with the Tiger hierarchy. When the Jaffna University Teachers' Association turned down a demand from JUSU for support in the students' "struggle" against his appointment, the head of the history department, who is supporting Hoole, had his house stoned that night, Hoole reported. (When contacted, the history professor confirmed that he is supporting Hoole's bid because he believes the U.S.-trained academic can help bring the beleaguered university "up to the mark.")

13. (C) The LTT is opposing his appointment, Hoole speculated, because the Tigers "want someone who's compliant" in the position. The current Vice Chancellor had to play along with the LTTE, Hoole indicated, allowing the JUSU to dominate school activities and pro-LTTE propaganda to predominate in school functions. Another likely reason for LTTE enmity against him, he said, is his brother's co-authorship of "The Broken Palmyrah," an analysis of the ethnic conflict that was critical of the Sri Lankan Government, the Indian Peacekeeping Force (IPKF) and the LTTE, that Hoole himself had arranged to have published in California in 1990. (Note: The LTTE killed one of the book's co-authors, Jaffna University Professor Rajani Thiranagama, in 1989. Hoole's brother Ranjan remains overseas. End note.) Other LTTE propaganda against him has focused on the fact that he is a Christian, accusing him of being "anti-Hindu," he claimed. Besides discriminating against him on the basis of religion, the Tigers are also using caste to foment against the nomination, he averred. The LTTE is basically anti-intellectual, Hoole asserted, since most of its leadership is drawn from the lower (and thus historically less-educated) castes.

14. (C) Hoole disputed the LTTE claim, made through its puppet JUSU, that his appointment was a politically motivated attempt to shut down the university. Rajapaksa appointed him because he was the best qualified, Hoole contended, adding that he was the only one of the three candidates to have obtained an advanced doctoral degree. Jaffna University is

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full of "in-bred professors" who, because they have done their undergraduate studies in Tamil, can only teach at Tamil universities and have never had their dissertations or other publications subject to peer scrutiny, he noted. Besides, he argued, under the current administration the LTTE itself, through the JUSU, decides when and if the university functions. (Comment: Student strikes demanding that the Sri Lanka Army withdraw from sites near the university have kept the university effectively closed since December. Lectures resumed for the first time since December on March 16. It is too soon to say if the university will remain open for any length of time. End comment.)

15. (C) Among the changes Hoole says he hopes to institute at the university--if and when he ever gets the "green light" to return to his native Jaffna--is to start an engineering faculty. The north used to lead the nation in producing engineers when he was younger, Hoole lamented. With the LTTE at the helm in the north, the number of senior qualified Tamil engineers has dropped from 140 to 4. Second, Hoole plans to make the Vavuniya branch, which now has fewer than 1,000 students, into "a full-fledged campus" of the university, thus offering greater opportunities for university education to Tamil-speaking youth. Third, he stressed, he would restore the "rule of law" to the university, ensuring that appointments and promotions are based on merit and academic qualifications, rather than malleability to LTTE demands.

16. (C) Comment: The Tigers have never been champions of academic freedom; their assassination of Dr. Rajani Thiranagama is just one of the best-known examples of their campaign to suppress any opposition to their influence. While we admire Professor Hoole's bravery and self-sacrifice, we have to question his prudence. Even a "green light" given by the LTTE today might quickly turn amber or red the next, and the LTTE's past actions offer no reason for greater trust or optimism now. One of the favorite complaints of the LTTE and its numerous proxies is that the Government of Sri Lanka (GSL) discriminates against the Tamil minority by failing to provide facilities in the north and east commensurate with those in the south. Another common allegation--which the LTTE uses to justify child recruitment--is that the GSL's failure to provide adequate educational opportunities for youth in the north and east leaves them no option but to seek employment with the Tigers. The LTTE's heavy-handed opposition to one of the best-qualified Tamil academics' efforts to improve education in Jaffna makes this claim ring hollower than ever.

ENTWISTLE